

# You are (not) a Monster

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## Saoirse7

Star Wars Sequel Trilogy

Complete



**You are (not) a Monster**

**Saoirse7**

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## Summary

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### Description:

Based on the prompt: "On a full moon night, drunk Rey mistakes a werewolf for a stray puppy. She coos at him and takes him home, feeds him, even washes off the dried mud (blood) on his fur. The next morning, she finds a naked man built like a fridge sleeping on her bedroom floor."

## Chapter 1

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Everything is pleasantly fuzzy by the time Rey leaves the bar and starts to head home. They were celebrating Finn's promotion, which included shots, and then dancing, and by the time Rey realized what time it was, half of their friends had already left.

She decided that seemed like a good idea.

She thinks she said goodbye to Finn and Rose, who were still there, but she isn't sure.

Whatever. She can catch up with them tomorrow. Which is Saturday. She thinks.

She glances up at the moon as she's weaving her way down the street and smiles. "Hello, beautiful," she murmurs at the partially full face. It's at least another week until it's completely full, but Rey can start to make out the eyes and full lips of the woman's face she always sees there.

"Beautiful, beautiful, Luna," she repeats to herself, tripping a bit on uneven sidewalk.

She's startled out of her thoughts as a loud clatter comes from a nearby alleyway. "Hello?" She walks closer, which sober Rey would have told her to *stop*, but drunk Rey is curious, and curiosity... did something. "Is someone there?"

A dark, four-legged shape slinks from behind a dumpster, and any lingering doubts she had vanish in the wake of— "Puppy!"

The large black dog freezes and looks at her, but it has nowhere to go, backed as it is into the alley. She practically skips up to it. "Hi puppy! I'm Rey! Are you a good boy?" The dog shrinks back from her descending hand but she doesn't give him the chance to bolt, seizing him by the scruff of his neck while she pets behind his ears. Other than giving her a wide-eyed look, the dog doesn't react. "You are a good boy, aren't you! Are you lost?"

She has the presence of mind to check for a collar, and on finding none, decides the best course of action would be to take the dog home. She can look for his people tomorrow, if he has any.

She half-leads, half-drags the dog the remaining block to her apartment and hurries him up the stairs to the third floor. "This is me!" she announces cheerily, and is proud that it only takes her two tries to get the door unlocked.

In the light of her living room, she's able to get a better look at her new friend. Larger than the average, the dog has thick black fur, matted in places, and soulful liquid brown eyes. A scar bisects his right eye and runs down his cheek. He eyes her warily and huddles against the wall once she releases him.

"Are you hungry?" she asks, and the dog's ears perk up before dropping again, but he watches her go into the kitchen and start pulling out a pan and bacon from the fridge. She should eat something greasy too, she reasons, ignoring the fact that it's early morning and if she eats now she won't sleep for at least an hour.

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees the dog slowly inch towards the kitchen and the tantalizing smell. He keeps giving her tiny glances, as though keeping tabs on her without trying to look like he is. She chuckles and puts a plate of freshly fried bacon on the floor while piling her own plate and sitting at the table.

“Go on, it’s for you,” she tells the dog encouragingly. He gives her one more glance before digging in, cleaning the plate in record time. The look he gives her this time is a little less guarded, and she smiles. “I’ll get you washed up once I’m done.”

He follows her into the bathroom and doesn’t protest when she puts him in the bath tub. By now, time, the turn of events, and the bacon are working their magic to clear her head, and she notices things she hadn’t before.

One, the dog is definitely male.

Two, he is too thin for his size. Definitely underfed and possibly malnourished.

Three, he has an intelligent look in his eyes, like he knows more than he lets on. She’s seen it before in the smarter breeds, like border collies, and wonders what breed he is.

“I’ve always wanted a dog,” she tells him as she pours warm water over his back. ‘I think we could be good for each other. As long as you don’t have an actual owner, of course.’ She looks him in the eye. “Do you have a person?”

He blinks at her. No tail wagging or other recognition of the words. Maybe he is a stray.

“I think I’ll call you Padfoot. He was also a big, black dog.” Though she doubts this one will turn into Sirius Black.

He sits patiently while she cleans him before shaking himself dry, to her sputtering laughter.

The laugh fades into a yawn. Time for bed. *Past* time for bed.

She coaxes him into her room and puts a blanket down for him on the floor near her bed. “It’s warmer in here,” she explains to those brown eyes. “I keep the door shut to keep the heat in.”

Then she crawls under her covers, asleep in moments with a smile on her face.

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Her hangover is a dull throb in the back of her skull, which isn’t as bad as it could be, but still, not great. She keeps her eyes closed as she sorts through the events of the previous evening.

There was the bar, the drinks, the dog—

The dog! She grins and rolls over, expecting to see him still asleep by the radiator.

That is not what she sees.

A massive, pale, dark-haired *man* is sleeping curled up on her floor.

An involuntary squeak escapes her lips and she claps a hand over her mouth. Should she call the cops? How did he even get in here? All she sees is miles of skin, because he is not wearing *a stitch of clothing*. Thankfully, his leg blocks her view of his groin.

His head jerks a fraction and her eyes grow wide. No! She woke him! Her mace is in her purse, and he is blocking her access to the door. She stopped keeping a bat by her bed when she moved to a safer neighborhood and has never regretted it more than this moment.

She watches, horrified, as sleepy eyes open and he lifts his head from where it was resting on his forearms. His expression looks just as confused as she feels.

His dark eyes focus on her briefly before blinking away to regard his arm, then sweep over his body, then meet her eyes again. He mumbles a soft expletive and drops his head back to rest on his arms.

It's a small consolation that he seems as surprised as she is that he's here, instead of wherever he should be, but the consolation does not go far.

"What are you doing here? How did you get in?"

His gaze snaps back to her but he doesn't say anything, only regards her warily.

"Answer me, or I'll call the cops!"

He flinches at that, raises a placating hand. "Please don't call the cops," he rumbles, and *oh*, his voice is deep. "Rey, isn't it? I'm not going to hurt you."

"How do you know my name? And how are you *here*?"

His expression turns apologetic. "You told me. And you brought—well, dragged me here."

She most certainly did not. She would have remembered if she had brought home a man built like a fridge. She wasn't that drunk.

"You even washed me," he continues despite her silence. "Thanks for that, by the way." He shifts and pulls out the blanket he was sleeping on, using it to cover his lower half before sitting up.

She tries to piece together what he's saying and why all of this is important, but her hangover headache is pounding. She brought home a dog, washed the dog, put down that blanket for the dog...

"You wanted to call me Padfoot," his voice is low, cautious, "but I think Remus would be more appropriate."

"You—" She now notices the scar running down his face and the puzzle falls into an awful picture. Her dog has somehow turned into a man and she's not sure if she wants to laugh or scream. "You're my dog?"

"Werewolf," he mumbles, his eyes downcast. "Yeah."

Her inner pendulum suddenly swings much closer to *scream* and she can't deal with this first thing on a Saturday with a hangover. "Get out."



His eyes meet hers for a split second before he nods quickly and shuffles out of the room, taking the blanket with him.

She indulges herself with a scream into her pillow, hating her impulsive drunk decisions, hating that she thought she finally could have a dog and the universe seems to be laughing, hating the last vulnerable look on his face, before rolling out of bed and heading to the bathroom.

The man is sitting on her couch, huddled in the blanket which is doing its best to cover his bulk.

“You’re still here.”

He looks at her, and she doesn’t want to take the time to decode the emotions in his eyes.

“Why are you still here?”

His gaze drops back to the floor and his mouth opens and closes a couple times before he says, quietly, “Do you have any clothes I could borrow?”

“It’s been a while since I had a boyfriend.”

He gives her a bewildered sideways glance and she sees more than hears him say, “What?”

Why did she say it like that? “I mean, I don’t have men’s clothes lying around. So no, I don’t have anything you could borrow.”

“Oh.” And his eyes are back on the ground.

*But you should have clothes at home*, she wants to say. Though sending him out into the streets buck naked does seem a bit cruel.

Rey Niima is many things and she hopes cruel isn’t one of them.

She sighs. She’s probably going to regret this. “I can have a friend of mine pick some up and bring them here.”

The look he gives her this time is a heart-wrenching cocktail of grateful and wary. “Thank you. That would be—” He swallows. “That would be great.”

She pulls her phone out to call Finn. It rings out the first time and goes to voicemail. Right, he’s probably still asleep. Who knows what time he got home last night, and it’s still before noon today.

Knowing he’ll call her back once he wakes up, she looks at the man again. “What’s your name?”

“Ben.” He’s addressing her rug and she suppresses a sigh.

“Just Ben?”

He nods.

“Do you want some breakfast, Ben?”

He stills, before shaking his head slowly.

She remembers a dog where she could see his ribs and pulls out a second bowl for cereal anyway.

When she places the bowl in front of him he mumbles a “thank you,” but doesn’t look up.

She sits in the armchair across from the couch and focuses her attention on his face and untidy hair and not on the broad expanse of chest that doesn’t fit under the blanket. At least, she tries.

She definitely doesn’t notice the way he eats the cereal like his dog form had eaten the bacon last night: as fast as possible and with a decidedly possessive air.

Finn calls back when she’s halfway through her own bowl and she steps into her bedroom to take the call.

“I didn’t think you’d be up yet. Sorry if I woke you.”

“My hangover woke me.” His laugh echoes down the line. “We were there until the bar closed.”

“How are you even moving?”

“Sheer force of will and a pot of coffee.”

She chuckles, shaking her head. “Effective if not enjoyable.”

“True enough. What were you calling about earlier?”

“I need a favor.”

“Shoot.”

“I need you to pick me up a set of men’s clothes: shirt, pants, and underpants, size large or extra-large, and I really need you to not ask why.”

“Now I’m definitely going to ask why.”

“Well, I can’t tell you why right now. I’ll pay you back, and I don’t need anything fancy. How soon can you get here?”

“Maybe an hour? Rey, what’s going on?”

“Just, please do this for me? I’ll explain everything later, I promise.”

“Okay...” He sounds suspicious, and she hates that, but it isn’t like she can tell him she accidentally brought home a werewolf. It’s more of an in-person conversation.

“Thank you! I owe you one.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

She heads back into the living room and Ben is exactly where she left him. “My friend will be here in an hour.”

He nods. She’s getting the distinct impression he doesn’t talk much.

“Are you going to be alright getting home?”

His brow furrows while still fixed on her rug. “Where are we?”

Does he have memory problems, too? “My apartment?”

She catches the smallest eye-roll and hides a smirk. So he does have a bit of an attitude. But he surprises her with his next question.

“I mean, what state is this?”

What state? How can he not know?

“Brooklyn? New York?”

His lips purse before he nods again.

“Where did you think we were?”

He lifts one shoulder in a shrug.

She shakes her head at his non-answer and stands to look out the window. So this is her life now. Picking up strays that turn into handsome strange men who don’t talk.

Wait, handsome?

She studies him again out of the corner of her eye. Maybe not handsome in the typical, Hollywood cookie cutter way, but compelling. And yes, handsome.

Ugh, she is so single.

Yet his question about the state is nagging at her. And his surprise at being human. And—  
“How long have you been a wolf?”

His eyes dart up to meet hers, wide and unsure, before he drops them again. He shrugs a little and shakes his head. “I don’t know,” he murmurs, barely audible.

“You don’t know?!”

Another head shake.

“I thought werewolves only transformed on the full moon?”

“Not always. I mean, it’s always on the full moon, but you don’t always change... back.”

Rey can’t imagine what it would be like to be stuck as a wolf. “So you could have been a wolf for years?”

“Maybe,” he mumbles.

Her head starts pounding again just thinking about it and she goes to make a pot of coffee. She returns with two mugs. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please.” He holds his hands out for the mug and the blanket slips off his shoulder.

Malnourished or not, this guy is built for strength. She briefly wonders what he would look like if he was healthy and happy, before mentally chiding herself on her wandering thoughts.

Ben is not staying. Don’t get attached.

They drink their coffee in silence, the blanket safely resecured over his shoulders.

Rey's mind is swirling with questions, but she bites them back. The more she knows, the more it might hurt to let him walk out that door. But he can't stay. Between the two options, that one is definitely worse.

Eventually, Finn calls to let her know he's outside, and she buzzes him in. He tries to see into the apartment when he comes to her door, but she grabs the bag of clothes with a smile and blocks his view of Ben.

"What's going on?" he asks in a low tone, a wrinkle between his brows.

"Come by this afternoon, and I'll tell you," she says in a matching tone, knowing without checking that Ben is listening.

He leaves grumbling, and she hopes he'll understand.

"Here." She thrusts the bag at Ben. "You can change in the bathroom, and then I think you should go."

He nods and takes it without meeting her eyes, arranging the blanket as he stands. When he reemerges from the bathroom a few minutes later, she notices the shirt is a little small and the pants are a little big.

But they were free, for him, and literally beggars can't be choosers.

"Good luck," she tells him, because it feels like she should say *something* and she doesn't quite know what it is.

"Thank you," he responds in his quiet voice. He stops in the doorway. "And thank you for your kindness." He meets her eyes one more time, then he's gone.

Finn does come by that afternoon, as she requested. But now that he's here, she finds herself not wanting to tell him what really happened. Something about those vulnerable eyes and the quiver in Ben's lip as he thanked her makes her want to keep Ben's secret.

Everyone has heard stories of werewolves. No one expects to actually meet one.

So she tells him that she wanted to help a homeless man who needed clothes, which may not be too far from the truth, and Finn squints at her.

"You need to be careful, Rey. Who knows what some of these guys want, or how they can take advantage of you."

Ben didn't want to take advantage of her. She didn't think he even wanted to be in her apartment at all.

She nods like she agrees with what he says and finds a way to change the subject. Finn is more than happy to discuss an upcoming vacation he's taking with Rose to the Bahamas in further celebration of his promotion, and she tries to put Ben out of her mind.

But if she thought she'd forget about him, she finds she was sorely mistaken.

## Chapter 2

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It's been a month since the Werewolf Incident and she still can't get it—and him—out of her mind.

The full moon has come and gone, so he had to have transformed, but she doesn't know the rules for changing back. So, theoretically, Ben could be out there as a wolf somewhere.

The thought both frightens her a little and makes her incredibly sad.

She's locking up at Plutt's used car lot-slash-scrapyard when a loud *clank* behind a row of broken-down SUV's nearly makes her jump out of her skin.

Against her better judgment—again—she creeps closer to the sound. They've been having a rat problem lately so Plutt set up traps, but the traps are probably larger than necessary.

They may have captured something bigger than a rat.

It certainly sounds bigger than a rat if the yelp and following whimpers are anything to go by. In fact, it sounds like—

She rounds the corner and sure enough, it's a dog, front paw caught in the metal of a trap. It sees her and struggles, which only prompts another yelp of pain.

"Hey, hey," she soothes. "Let me help."

It watches her with huge brown eyes, a scar running—wait—

"Ben?"

The dog's ears perk up ever so slightly, and she really, *really* hopes this is Ben because otherwise she's going to sound ridiculous.

"Alright, Ben, I'm going to get you out of that, okay?" She steps closer and is gratified to notice that he isn't struggling any more. His eyes don't leave her as she carefully disengages the trap, then tosses the hunk of metal away from them.

Just as gently, she checks his paw for cuts or broken bones. It doesn't seem broken, but he whines a little as she applies pressure.

"If you want, I can help you clean and bandage that up, but you'll need to come back home with me. Is that okay?" She doesn't want to take that choice away from him again.

His tail flops twice in succession and she grins.

"I'll take that."

She stands and starts to head out of the scrapyard. He's following her, albeit slowly, and favoring his injured foot. She stops and waits for him outside the entrance, and when he catches up, he pauses.

Then, to her surprise, he sits back on his hind legs and lifts his front paws in the air, watching her with the best imitation of puppy eyes she's ever seen.

"Do you—do you want me to pick you up?"

His tail flops again.

"Okay." She chuckles a little at the absurdity of the situation. She has to figure out a way to smuggle this dog onto the subway, then get him all the way up to her apartment, and now he wants to be carried.

Sure, she can do this.

She leans down and hefts him into her arms and honestly—she shouldn't be surprised that a man as big as he was turns into a dog that weighs a ton, but she grunts as she lifts him and staggers ever so slightly.

"You're heavier than you look," she gasps and fights for balance. His response is to place his head on her shoulder, and she can't argue with that, so she takes halting steps towards the station.

She makes it about a block before deciding that she won't be able to deal with the stairs to get him on the train, then off, then up to her apartment, and splurges on an Uber.

She then has to go through a whole spiel with the Uber driver about how good a dog he is and no, he won't make a mess or pee in the backseat, and she is uncomfortably aware that she herself barely knows this dog, and she probably couldn't control him if she wanted to.

But eventually, they make it back to her apartment. Ben limps up the stairs by himself, and all Rey wants to do once she gets inside is take a long bath and then veg with a glass of wine, but she promised Ben she'd help.

She keeps her promises.

She cleans and bandages the wound before setting him up on the couch and telling him not to move. Then she grabs some frozen pizza for her and a decent supply of bacon for him, and puts on a movie.

She asks his opinion for the movie, but he doesn't seem to want to do the tail wagging as communication anymore.

So, she puts on an action movie and hopes he likes it.

Turns out, it doesn't matter if he likes it, because less than an hour in finds him asleep with his head in her lap. She wants to rub his belly like she would a normal dog, but she isn't sure if it would be appreciated. Instead, she rests her hand on his head, and when dreams cause him to twitch and whimper, she gently rubs his ears until he settles.

It's... domestic, in a way she didn't expect.

He's still asleep when the movie ends, on his side with his bandaged paw hanging over the edge of the couch, so she eases from under him, covers him with a blanket in anticipation of the morning naked man, and leaves a change of clothes at the end of the couch before heading to bed.

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When she wakes, she hurries out to the living room and finds Ben awake, still huddled under the blanket and holding the shirt she left. He looks up with a confused expression as he hears her.

“Are these—?” he rasps.

“Yes! They’re for you. What do you want for breakfast?” she asks as she heads into the kitchen.

She’s met by silence, and she looks over, thinking he may be in the bathroom, but instead finds him watching her with eyes narrowed.

“Ben? Breakfast?”

“Doesn’t matter,” he mumbles, eyes dropping to the floor and shuffling to change.

She tries not to read too much into his dismissal and starts making scrambled eggs with toast. She’s thankful it’s Saturday, that she always seems to deal with him on Saturdays, so far, because she can’t imagine trying to do all this and get to work at a decent time.

He comes back in a few minutes and leans on the short wall separating the kitchen from the living room. She’s pleased to note the clothes fit a little better this time. “Do you want help?”

“Uh, sure, do you want to toast the bread?” She points out her toaster in the corner, but she underestimated him and how much space he would take up in her kitchen.

The kitchen seems to shrink the moment he steps into it, and she takes a couple deep breaths to ward off the claustrophobia. So maybe this wasn’t the most thought-out plan.

She almost trips over him heading to the cupboards to get the plates, and again as she puts the pan in the sink to be washed. She sighs as she steps around him *again* to reach the table just as the toast pops.

She looks up to find him watching her, his shoulders hunched. “Sorry,” he whispers, and she realizes that he must have sensed her irritation with his size. Dogs were intuitive to emotions, weren’t they? What about werewolves?

She manages a smile and shakes her head before indicating for him to take a seat. “Tell me about yourself, Ben.”

His eyes widen in panic.

“You don’t need to tell me anything you don’t want to,” she chuckles. “This isn’t an interrogation.”

His gaze drops again but the tension in his shoulders doesn’t leave. “Okay,” he says, barely audible.

“I take it you aren’t from New York.”

He shakes his head.

“Neither am I, actually. I’m originally from a small town in New Mexico. Moved here for a job.” She figures it’s only fair to give information that she is asking for.

“Indiana,” he mumbles around a bite of toast. “I—” He swallows, clears his throat. “I ran until I couldn’t.”

“Wait, you ran here from Indiana?”

He nods. “As a wolf.”

No wonder he didn’t know where he was. “That’s a really long way.”

He answers with a shrug and keeps his gaze fixed on his meal.

“I was wondering, based on what you said last time—”

“Why do you care?” he interrupts sharply, blazing eyes finally meeting hers. “You couldn’t wait to get rid of me last time. Now you’re asking questions, leaving clothes...” He plucks at his shirt. “I don’t understand.”

She sighs. “I treated you poorly last time, and I’m sorry. I want to help you.”

He stares at her another long moment, eyes darting between hers, before his brow furrows and his gaze drops again. “You would be the first,” he says quietly.

Her heart sinks. She doesn’t know how to respond to that, so she tries again with her earlier question. “Why don’t you always change back from a wolf?”

“It’s based on human interaction.” His voice is still quiet. ‘The less I have, the less I—the less I’m human.’ He pushes eggs around his plate. “*Positive* interaction,” he adds, with a wry half-smile.

The implications of that make her heart hurt. “So, if I hadn’t brought you home and fed you and given you a place to sleep, you wouldn’t have changed?”

He shakes his head.

“Did you know you would change when I brought you home?”

He shakes his head again.

“But it’s better to be a human, right?” She tries for a smile but feels it fall when he doesn’t look up, and even more at his next whispered words.

“Is it?”

She’s seized with a bizarre urge to reach for his hand. “Is it not?”

“People don’t look twice at a dog sleeping in a doorway or under a bridge. No one faults a dog for digging through their trash.”

“Is that really what you’ve been eating? Trash?”

He nods slowly. “And rats.”

“That’s why you were at Plutt’s! The scrapyard,” she clarifies when his brow furrows in confusion.



“You work there?”

“Yeah. Not glamorous, but it pays the bills.”

“You guys have an infestation.”

She laughs. Honest-to-goodness laughs. *That* gets him to look up in surprise. “You’re right,” she giggles. “That’s what the traps are for.”

His mouth twists, like he can’t decide whether to smile or frown, until he gives her a single, “Yeah.”

The conversation lulls, before he speaks up again. “I didn’t know you worked there when—I promise I’m not—”

She shakes her head and smiles. “I know. I’m glad I found you again, though.” She worried about him, but she isn’t going to tell him that. “How’s your hand?”

He looks at the bandage still wrapped around his wrist. “Better, I think.”

“Does being a werewolf give you fast healing?”

“No.” She catches the barest glimpse of a smile before it’s gone. “But it’ll be good not to walk on it.”

“Ah!” She points her fork at him in triumph. “A benefit to being human.”

The smile is larger now, but no less brief. “I suppose.”

She wonders what it would take to make him smile for real, and finds herself wanting to find out.

He clears his throat and stands before she can say anything more. “I should go. Thank you, again, for your hospitality, Rey.”

She also stands, more for something to do than anything else. “Where will you go?”

He stares at her and doesn’t answer.

“There’s a shelter over on Evergreen Boulevard, I could take you—”

“No.”

“No?”

“I can’t stay at a shelter. I don’t have any ID, and even if I did, my... condition...”

She suddenly realizes that when he said he *ran here from Indiana* that means he literally has nothing. No money, no ID, no phone or anything else to contact anyone who could help. Wolves don’t have pockets.

She blinks away an unexpected sting behind her eyes. “Oh.”

“But thank you again,” he repeats softly, heading to the door. ‘And,’ he pauses, still facing away, “if you see me again, it might be just as well to let me be.”

“Let—”

“I’m dangerous. Let me be.”

His eyes meet hers one last time, burning and full of things she can’t decipher, then he leaves as quietly as he came. She’s too in shock to stop him.

What did he mean, dangerous? She pictures the haunted and beseeching eyes of his dog form. He’d never tried to hurt her.

But his warning shakes her and she can’t stop thinking about it the rest of the day, when she goes with Finn and Rose to a movie, or the rest of the week, when every tall, dark-haired man on the street looks like Ben and she has to stop herself from tapping each one on the shoulder.

After a day, her curiosity gets the better of her and she types “Indiana werewolf attack” into Google. No one runs halfway across the country without a desperate need to get away. And while it feels like prying, part of her *has* to know.

She’s met with a dismaying number of results, mostly centered around Indianapolis. Several injuries, one lawsuit—dismissed with the lack of evidence—and a small handful of deaths.

One in particular stands out: Han Solo, racecar driver. She remembers her foster father always having the TV on to the races, and she blames that for her fascination with fast transportation. Han Solo was a household name ten years ago.

He died?

She clicks on the article.

Apparently, Solo died almost a year ago, succumbing to injuries that matched the description of a werewolf attack. The area seemed to have a pack, according to locals. She scrolls to the bottom and finds a single phrase that sends a cold wave washing over her: “Solo is survived by his wife, Indiana-state senator Leia Organa, and son Benjamin.”

She reads it. Reads it again.

Rey doesn’t typically believe in coincidences. She prefers to believe that things in life have a purpose. It gives her hope.

But suddenly, she finds herself really wanting to believe this is a coincidence.

Because the alternative—the alternative is horrifying.

## Chapter 3

---

She truly does see him on the street the next week.

He's walking towards her, his eyes on the ground as usual, a plastic bag cradled in his arms. She notices he's found himself a pair of mismatched shoes.

She's torn between whether she should say something or let him pass, his warning still ringing in her ears, the article about Han Solo still on a loop in her mind's eye.

But it isn't a coincidence that she's run into him for a third time. And she's pretty sure there's more to this story. Decision made, she waits until he almost would have passed her before she speaks.

"Hey, Ben."

He looks up with a deer-in-the-headlights expression that relaxes when he recognizes her. "Hi. Fancy meeting you here."

Her eyebrows go up at this reminder that he does have a sense of humor when he wants to. When he actually talks. "Indeed. Where are you headed?"

He shrugs and looks past her. "Anywhere, really. The cop just told me I couldn't stay where I was."

"Could I buy you lunch?"

His expression sharpens as his eyes meet hers again. "No, I don't think so. I owe you enough already."

Owe *her*? "Don't worry about that. I'm not keeping track." She tries for a reassuring smile.

"I am." The words are quiet.

This stubborn man. "Well, don't. I'm happy to help."

He sighs and shakes his head. "I don't deserve your kindness, Rey."

"You say that as if I didn't yell at you and practically throw you out the first morning."

"You were overwhelmed. Anyone would have done the same."

She rolls her eyes. "Don't make excuses for me."

"And don't feel as though you need to keep making up for it." His tone is still quiet but there's something more behind it—anger? Hurt? He refuses to look at her, so she can't try to read his eyes.

"I'm not." It's the truth, or as true as she's willing to admit to herself. Yes, she wishes she'd done things differently, but this is now and he still needs help she's able to provide. "So, lunch?"

He looks past her again before shaking his head ever so slightly. "Sure, I guess," he answers after a long moment.

She'll take it.

---

"About what I said last time," he starts after he's inhaled two and a half burritos and over half of the complimentary nacho chips.

She sits up a little straighter. She'd been hoping to have this conversation and get some answers but wasn't sure how to broach the subject.

"I don't actually want you to stay away," he admits slowly. "But I think it's better if you do. I don't want to hurt you."

"You've never tried to hurt me before." Her second taco is starting to fall apart and she picks pieces of lettuce up from the wrap. "In fact, you were the one to tell me that you wouldn't hurt me, that first morning."

His mouth opens and closes, before he manages a quiet, "Right." Maybe he'd forgotten he said that. "The night I change is always the worst, though. I don't want you to find me then. Since we keep running into each other," he finishes in barely a whisper.

"You're Benjamin Solo, aren't you?" The question has been ringing on a loop in her mind for three days, and it finally bursts out of her. It's a few seconds before she even realizes she said anything at all.

But the look on his face makes her wish she had kept it to herself. Or at least eased into it.

His eyes snap to hers, and his mouth gapes. "*What?*" he gasps, shock and panic competing across his features.

She presses ahead, eager to know. If she knows, then... well, then she'll know. And that will be good, right? "Han Solo's son? I found an article... it said he died several months ago. His injuries looked like a werewolf attack."

His jaw tightens. The shock is replaced by steel. "I didn't kill him."

"I didn't say you did. But you are Ben Solo, aren't you?"

His eyes harden even more. She's hit a nerve with this one. Good. Nerves mean honesty.

He stands abruptly, his chair making a loud screech on the floor, and he throws his napkin onto the table. "Stay out of things that don't concern you," he snaps. "And stay away from me."

Then he grabs the bag with his belongings and exits the restaurant with a slap to the door so loud you'd think it had personally wronged him.

She sits there in the ringing silence, a little stunned. Of all the things she expected to happen, why wasn't *him walking out* at the top of the list?

Now she's made sure she won't see him again. Why couldn't she keep her curiosity to herself?

---

Well, she had thought she wouldn't see him again. Right now, she wishes that were the case.

Then she wouldn't have upwards of a hundred pounds of muscle staring at her with a snarl on his face.

Tonight is the full moon. And he looks angry.

It's been most of a week since she bought him lunch and paired it with too personal a question. She'd left the restaurant that day and tried to put him out of her mind.

With as much success as she'd had the last two times she tried to forget about him.

Which is none.

But really, the fact that he's here at the scrapyard again is all on him.

And the fact that she accidentally locked them in together is all on her.

"Ben, I know that's you," she whispers, and there's no recognition on the dog—wolf's—face.

She tries again. He's in between her and the gate, so she couldn't leave him here even if she wanted to.

"Ben, please. I know you don't want to hurt people." His snarl diminishes slightly, but it's still there. 'I'm sorry for bringing up your dad. Please know I didn't do it to hurt you.' His ears aren't plastered to his head anymore, that's a good sign. "Listen, if you want to talk about it, or if you just want a meal and a safe place to sleep, come see me this week after you—after you change back. You know where I live."

He isn't snarling at her now, which means he's listening. It means that Ben's mind is still there even in the body of the wolf on the night of the full moon.

It means hope.

"If you let me by, I can get both of us out of the scrapyard."

And he moves.

He shuffles out of the way before sitting down on the ground with his head cocked to the side.

She breathes again. "Thank you." The words are barely more than a whisper but she knows he hears them.

When she unlocks the gate, he bounds out, disappearing into the darkness beyond.

She just survived an encounter with an angry werewolf. Right there is all the proof she needs that Ben doesn't want to hurt her, and whatever happened with his dad, it wasn't him.

It's also all the reason she needs to crack open that bottle of rosé once she's home and safe, but this isn't about that.

---

Three days later she's pretty sure he isn't going to take her up on her offer. She hasn't seen head or tail of him since the night of the full moon, and if he wanted her help, he'd be here by now.

She shakes her head and pulls the steamed veggies out of the microwave for dinner. She'd had a long day at work, and she's ready to relax and think about something other than Ben Solo.

She finishes making her plate and is about to sit down when there's a knock at the door.

That's funny. Anyone who comes to visit should have to be buzzed in. Maybe it's someone from the apartment.

It isn't.

An uncomfortable-looking Ben is standing there, hands in the pockets of his coat and shifting on his feet.

"How did you get in?" Apparently, she has no filter where he is concerned. None.

"Hello to you too," he mumbles with a tiny smirk, before saying, 'Someone was going out as I was coming,' and pointing in the direction of the door. "Is your offer still open?" He meets her eyes cautiously.

"Of course." Her response is automatic as she steps back to allow him in. "I was just sitting down for dinner. Did you want some?"

"No, I'm not staying. I just—you said you'd listen." His eyes are trekking their usual path across her rug.

"I can listen while I eat. Please, sit down."

He sits where she points and she makes him a plate of her chicken and veggies, but he shakes his head when she places it in front of him. "Rey, I really don't—"

She interrupts him with a sigh. "Are you hungry?"

His stomach gurgles a response and his cheeks flush.

"Then just eat."

He opens his mouth like he intends to argue, before thinking better of it and clearing his throat and nodding.

"I didn't kill Han Solo," he says as soon as his plate is clean; which, as usual, is in record time. "But it is my fault he's dead." He fiddles with his napkin and doesn't meet her eyes.

She waits.

"I've been a werewolf since I was less than ten years old. My mom says I was bit on a camping trip and they didn't realize what it was until the next full moon." He blows out a breath. "My parents never really knew what to do with me."

She watches his eyes fill with tears and he shakes his head and blinks them back.

“In my late teens, I found there was a pack in the area. They understood me. My parents didn’t like it. They said the pack was dangerous.” He clears his throat. “But I ignored them.

“The night my—the night Han—the night—” He swallows and closes his eyes before trying again. ‘The night he died,’ his voice breaks on the last word, “we had an argument. My parents were trying to show me that the pack had hurt people and I didn’t want to believe them. It was a full moon.”

Rey feels like she’s outside of herself, listening. Her last three pieces of broccoli are cold on her plate but she can’t bring herself to look away.

“I left angry. I knew I’d turn soon and I didn’t want to be there for it. But my dad—he followed me. I didn’t know or else I wouldn’t have led him to the pack.” He draws a shaky breath and swipes at his eyes, which are still closed. “The leader wanted me to kill him and when I didn’t, he did.”

She has to strain to hear his last words, even in the quiet kitchen. Distantly, she registers the horn of an angry driver. She waits again for him to continue but it seems he’s done for now, drying his eyes on his shirt sleeve and folding and re-folding his napkin.

“I’m so sorry, Ben,” she says after the silence stretches too long.

He nods, once, then mumbles, “Now you know.”

“You ran away that night?”

He nods again. “I—” He stops, swallows. “It was the only thing I could do.”

“I didn’t know.”

“No, you didn’t. But now I hope you understand why you should stay away from me.” He stands suddenly, like he did in the restaurant a week ago, and she’s pretty sure by now that he leaves when he’s uncomfortable or doesn’t want to deal with something.

So she thanks him for telling her what happened and he thanks her for listening, and then she lets him go.

Even though it hurts now to watch him leave.

## Chapter 4

---

A month goes by, then another one. She's beginning to think that she won't run into Ben again, that his halting explanation for his dad's death is the last thing she'll ever hear from him.

She spends more time with Finn and Rose and Finn's coworker, Poe. They have game nights and movie nights and go out to pub trivia and karaoke. Rose convinces her to start looking for a new job, and she starts applying to mechanic shops in the area or no more than a few stops on the train.

It's an ordinary Friday night as she heads home from what she hopes is one of the last days she's working at Plutt's to change before she and the trio head out to catch the latest Marvel movie.

She's expecting her friends to show up at her place in about a half an hour to pick her up so they can carpool.

What she does not expect is a certain dark-haired refrigerator leaning on the wall outside the door to her building, his face a grimace of pain.

"Ben? What are you doing here?"

"Rey, I—" He groans and doubles over.

"Are you hurt?!"

"Not—no. Help—"

"Here, let's get you upstairs."

"Can't—tonight—"

"Tell me in a minute." She puts one arm around his middle and throws one of his own arms across her shoulders, and together they manage up three flights of stairs and into her apartment. After she deposits him on the couch, she pulls her bandages out of the bathroom and hurries back to his side. "What is it? Where does it hurt?"

"Not hurt. Rey—it's the full moon."

She freezes. "What does that mean for me?"

"Can I stay? I won't hurt—ah—" He groans again. "Just need someplace safe."

She thinks about how her friends are going to be here soon to pick her up for the theater. She thinks about how he told her that the night he changes is always the worst. She remembers the big black wolf snarling at her in the scrapyard.

But then he looks at her, eyes wide and pleading, sweat just starting at his brow, and she knows there's only one answer she can give:

"Of course."



She'll just explain to the trio that something came up unexpectedly. They'll understand.

Relief floods his expression before he curls in tighter. "Thank you," he murmurs, barely audible.

"Is there anything I can get you?"

"Uh—glass of water, maybe?"

She notes the tension in his voice and wonders how long before he changes. Is it when the moon rises? Midnight?

She's filling the glass at the sink when she hears a loud grunt and then a groan. "Ben?" She's torn between finishing filling the glass or stopping the water to investigate and compromises by balancing the glass in the sink to fill while she checks on him.

But when she turns around, Ben isn't on her couch anymore. In his place is the wolf.

Well, that answers that question.

"Did you even need that glass of water?"

He yawns, tongue lolling, and looks away.

Having more time to ask questions would have been nice. Or at least set up some sort of system where two wags meant yes. She sighs and turns off the water before plopping down on the couch next to him. *Now what?*

The buzzer chooses that moment to sing the song of its people and Ben looks to the door in interest. It's probably her friends. She decides it'll be easier to explain her change of plans in person instead of through her unreliable intercom and buzzes them in.

"Hey guys," she greets, cracking the door.

"Hey, Rey! You ready to go?"

"I can't, I'm sorry."

"What?!" Poe and Finn say at the same time, and Rose just groans. "How come?"

"I'm..." *Crud.* Why didn't she have an excuse prepared? "I'm dog-sitting for a friend." *Nice one. Real convincing.* But not entirely untrue.

"Oh, really? Can we meet the dog?" No suspicion, just genuine interest.

She understands their enthusiasm, but the thought of introducing a *werewolf* to her friends as a pet dog terrifies her. More so than the actual werewolf, if she's being honest.

Which, that's a thought to examine another day.

"Uh, the dog is really shy, let me make sure he'd be okay with you guys." And she shuts the door in their faces.

"Alright Ben, be honest," she says as she approaches the couch. "Would you be okay with meeting my friends like this?"

He blinks at her.

She tries again. “Could you wag your tail or something if you’re okay with it? They’re really nice, I promise. And I can tell them not to pet you,” she adds, cringing. No doubt they’d want to, but she can imagine how weird that might be for Ben.

He watches her for a long moment, then thumps his tail a few times on the couch.

“Really? You’re sure?” She can’t fight a grin as he thumps his tail again, and she heads back to the door.

She opens it to three surprised faces, probably from her abrupt departure, but surprise turns to joy as she tells them to come in and meet “her friend’s dog.”

“You can say hi but he doesn’t like to be touched, so please don’t pet,” she says, and Rose’s squealing descent halts.

“Don’t pet?”

“No, sorry. Like I said, he’s shy.”

There’s a collective grumble of disappointment, but it quickly passes in favor of asking questions she does her best to answer. Ben is watching them with his head on his paws, and Rey steps over to him. She isn’t sure if she’s protecting him or them.

“What’s his name?”

“What kind of dog is he?”

“His name is Padfoot,” she silently congratulates herself on already having a name ready, “and he’s... a rescue.”

“That’s cool. My sister has a rescue,” Rose says from the floor, where she’s clearly barely restraining herself from petting him.

“He’s a good boy.” Rey smiles down at him before realizing she should probably introduce her friends to him, too. ‘Oh, this is Rose, Finn, and Poe.’ She points to each of her friends in turn. “That way he’ll remember you if you ever see him again,” she explains weakly, and if the introductions seemed weird to anyone else they don’t comment.

After the three of them have gushed over him for a few minutes, Rey tries to gently encourage them out the door. The whole situation is making her antsy. “Are you guys still headed to the movie?”

She doesn’t miss the way Ben snaps to look at her, eyes wide and liquid. She shakes her head ever so slightly in an attempt to reassure him.

“Actually, if you don’t mind, maybe we could do a game night here with you and Padfoot? Since you aren’t able to join us?” Poe has his hands in his pockets and grinning like he’s expecting her to agree.

The three of them? Here the rest of the night with Ben, who has a massive secret? “Oh, uh...” Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Ben climb off the couch with head and tail low, slinking in the direction of her bedroom. “Just a moment,” she tells them hurriedly, and follows him before closing the door behind them.

He won’t look at her.

"I know you only agreed to meeting my friends. And I understand if you aren't comfortable with them here tonight. But I can make a lot of assumptions and I don't want to speak for you. So please, *please* wag your tail or bark if you are okay with them staying for a game night."

He curls up in a ball facing away from her.

She sighs. "In the morning, we are going to talk about this and how we could communicate when you're a wolf." Sitting on the edge of the bed, she pinches the bridge of her nose. 'This is fine,' she mumbles. Totally fine she's essentially babysitting a werewolf who she can't communicate with. Louder, she continues, "It's fine you don't want them to stay, Ben. I understand."

She returns to the living room to find three confused expressions.

"You guys okay?" Finn asks slowly.

"Just fine," she responds with a smile too bright for her current feelings. "But I think I'm going to pass on the—" She's interrupted by a gentle nudge to the back of her knee, and when she looks down, Ben is wagging his tail, tongue lolling in a dog-smile.

Mentally adding his abrupt attitude shift to the list of topics they would need to cover in the morning, she gives the trio a genuine smile this time. "—uh, movie, for sure. But a game night sounds great!"

To his credit, Ben stays in the living room most of the time her friends are there. She makes him some bacon and leaves a bowl of water out, and he lays under the table with his head on her foot.

Overall, to her pleasant surprise, the night is a success. Other than make a few comments about how intelligent the dog clearly is, her friends ignore him, which is much better than giving him a bunch of attention he doesn't want.

She thinks that maybe Ben could hang out with the three of them sometime. As a human.

Her friends leave around midnight, and each gives "Padfoot" a separate goodbye while Rey hides a smile.

Afterwards, Ben spends the night on the couch with a blanket and a set of clothes at the ready, and she mentally prepares herself for an interesting conversation in the morning.

---

When she wakes up, he's already dressed and sitting on the edge of the couch. "Good morning," he greets quietly as she emerges rubbing her eyes.

"Morning." She wanders into the kitchen and grabs bowls and cereal and milk and plops down on the couch next to him.

"You said you wanted to talk?" he starts, and she shakes her head.

"After breakfast. And coffee."

And he smiles. It's a beautiful smile.

“You think so?”

Whoops. This is why Rey doesn’t do anything before coffee. She never knows what may come out of her mouth.

She settles for “mmhmm” as an answer and focuses on her food.

After a large bowl of cereal and a good-sized cup of coffee, she gets comfortable on the couch with her second cup as Ben sips from his own mug.

“So. Last night. You’ve told me before that the night you change is always the worst, yet you came to me on the full moon?”

He winces and she doesn’t think it’s from the hot coffee. “My wolf trusts you,” he says, and she nearly chokes on her drink.

“What does that mean?”

“I’ve never—” He swallows and starts again. ‘I’ve never been comfortable around anyone in my wolf form. But you—’ His gaze lifts from her floor to look out the window behind her. Still pointedly not looking at her. “It’s like I’m drawn to you.” He pauses and takes a deep breath. “The last couple months have been hard,” he finishes quietly. “Each time I woke up on the street after I changed I wanted to be waking up here.”

Oh.

“Why didn’t you come here sooner, then? I was beginning to think I wouldn’t see you again.”

He gives a self-deprecating chuckle. “After I spent all that time trying to convince you to stay away from me?”

She shakes her head. Men and their pride. “You’re always welcome here. In fact, I was thinking that you might want to hang out with my friends and I sometime.”

He finally looks at her, something like hope shining in his eyes.

His open expression shutters immediately with her next words: “There’s only so much I can do to help, though. I think you should call your mom.”

“I don’t think so,” he mutters darkly, and she can tell he wants to leave.

“Ben, please—”

“I can’t, okay?! My father is dead because of me!” He stands briefly before dropping back onto the couch, his head in his hands. “I can’t,” he repeats, muffled but clearly miserable.

“I don’t know,” she murmurs, resisting the urge to place a soothing hand on his back, “if I’d lost my husband and my son was missing, I’d want to know he was alive.”

She hears a suspicious snuffle, and if his eyes are red when he raises his head to look at her, she doesn’t judge.

“Not today,” he finally whispers. “But I’ll think about it.”

He stands again, and she knows he's preparing to leave as he always does. But maybe, just maybe, today can be different.

"You could stay," she offers, gauging his reaction. "I have the board games or we could watch a movie."

He pauses before giving her a tentative smile.

They settle back onto the couch after getting drink refills and Ben chooses Monopoly from her stack of board games.

Which he completely demolishes her at.

Before admitting that before he left Indiana, he was a financial analyst for a law firm.

He admits it shyly, as an explanation and maybe an apology for the demolishing, but what it mostly accomplishes is making Rey painfully aware that he had a life before she found him in that alley. Before he left it all behind.

"What was it like with the change and your job?"

"It was okay, most of the time." He carefully stacks the property cards back into the box. "I was around people enough that it was only the one night that I needed to stay home, lock the doors, keep a hot water bottle..." He trails off and sighs. "I'm probably fired by now."

"Maybe you could explain what happened. Maybe they'd understand."

He gapes at her. "Tell them I'm a werewolf?"

"Is that—did they not know?"

"No, they didn't know. It's not something you tell people."

"You told me."

"I—" His mouth opens and closes a few times. "That was different. You already saw the wolf and you were freaking out." His gaze drops. "That's normally what happens. People freak out. Understandable, I guess." He pauses to scoop the plastic houses into their bag. "Though we aren't all mindless man-eaters."

"Just that pack leader."

Ben scowls. "Snoke," he mutters. "Probably not even his real name. But if I ever see him again, I'll kill him myself."

"You can't mean that!"

His dark expression says otherwise. But he doesn't respond, only finishes packing up the game and returns it to her shelf. "It's getting late," he says with a glance out her window. "I don't want to overstay my welcome."

She bites back the original retort that came to mind at the teasing glint in his eyes and slight smirk to his mouth. "You know you're always welcome," she tells him instead.

He bows slightly, which she finds baffling, and runs a hand through his hair as he straightens. "Thank you," she barely hears him say.

And then he bids her goodbye and leaves again.

In the ensuing silence, she muses over their conversation as they'd played. He'd agreed not to show up on a full moon night without any warning, and that he'd do his best to communicate through wagging his tail if and when he did show up on a full moon again.

Given their interactions so far when he's been a wolf, she's a little surprised to find out he doesn't have full control during those nights.

Most control, but not total control. It does explain why he'd dejectedly left the room after her friends suggested the game night. The wolf was disappointed, but Ben was able to show that he didn't mind her friends there in spite of it.

He's an odd dichotomy, she's learning. He isn't just a man who turns into a wolf once a month, nor is he a wolf who just spends most of his time as a man. Aspects of both filter his worldview.

She's also learning that he's intelligent and well-educated, with a dry humor. Every conversation they have, she finds herself wanting to find a way to prolong it. Which is mostly on her because he still barely talks.

But that's okay.

They'd actually planned a time to see each other next. She, Finn, Rose, and Poe are all going to the Bronx Zoo next weekend, and so she invited Ben to join them.

To her delight, he'd agreed.

She realizes that at some point along the way, she's come to care about this wolf and his quiet, guarded person. It's not an entirely unwelcome realization.

## Chapter 5

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Ben shows up at her apartment on Saturday a little before 10, before everyone else, and the first thing she notices is that his hair isn't greasy anymore. He's wearing one of the shirts she got him and he looks... good.

He helps her make sandwiches for lunch until the others arrive, then it's a flurry of introductions and making sure they have everything they need before they head to the train.

"How'd you guys meet?" Poe asks after they're settled on the subway.

"Uh—" Ben looks to her in a panic.

"He lives in my building," Rey says quickly, hoping she can remember this lie on top of the others. "He's the one that owns Padfoot."

Ben blanches but nods. "That's me."

"Oh yeah! Padfoot is a great dog. How long have you had him?"

"...ten years?" Ben winces a little and shakes his head. "A long time," he mumbles to the floor.

Poe is undeterred by Ben's weak responses. "That is a long time! Rey said he was a rescue. Did you get him as a puppy?"

Ben nods, swallowing hard. "As a puppy," he echoes, and it puts the sudden image in Rey's mind of a young werewolf Ben turning into a gangly black puppy with paws he would grow into.

She hides a smile before turning to Poe. It might be time to rescue Ben from Poe's rapid-fire questioning. "I heard your date with that girl from accounting went well. What was her name? Kim?"

"Kay," Poe corrects with a broad grin, and proceeds to launch into a story about her dog and the walk they took several days ago.

Ben slides her a grateful look.

The rest of the trip passes uneventfully, with Poe having a mostly one-sided conversation about his date. When they arrive, Rey goes to quietly pay for both her and Ben's tickets, but he's pulling out cash to pay for his own before she can.

She shoots him a question in the form of raised eyebrows, and he shrugs. "Turns out some people are willing to pay a few dollars for a helping hand."

"That's good," is the only thing she can think to respond. She's glad he's found some way of making a little money.

And thankfully, her friends don't notice the exchange.

"I haven't been to the zoo in ages," Ben admits as they're walking by the giraffes. It's a beautiful day—sunny with just the right amount of wind. "Probably not since I was a child."

"I hadn't been to one before I moved to New York. Finn dragged me here within a few months after I arrived. Said it was necessary to my life experiences." She snorts.

"It was and still is," Finn says, coming up behind them. "How long have you been in New York, Ben?"

"Less than a year."

"What brought you?"

Ben's mouth twists. "A change of pace," he mumbles.

"Where were you at before?"

"Midwest."

She gives him a sidewise glance at all his non-answers. He's staring at his feet, not looking at either Rey or Finn.

"Alright then," Finn says with a forced chuckle, and passes them to chat with Poe.

"Did you tell them anything about me?" he asks once Finn has moved on.

"Not really. Just that we're friends." She stops to read a sign by the lions.

"Are we?"

She looks up at him in surprise. "I thought we were."

His face breaks out into the biggest smile she's seen from him yet. "Good."

Is it her imagination, or is he walking a little closer to her after that?

Not that she minds. Nope, she does not mind one bit.

"What was your favorite animal at the zoo?" she asks as they're heading to the reptile house. "Did your zoo have wolves?"

He shakes his head. "I liked the big cats, actually. Especially panthers."

"Can you talk to animals?"

"No more than you."

"Did you try when you first turned?"

He doesn't respond immediately and when she glances up at him, she finds he's watching her with a peculiar expression. He looks away when they make eye contact and the corner of his mouth quirks up. "You know, animals don't have a proper language like humans, right?"

"What, you're not like Dr. Doolittle?"

He lets out a short little chuckle, and his face is almost like he's surprised to be laughing. She loves it.



She hopes he'll quip back but he just shakes his head again.

"No, I'm not."

So she can't help but tease him a little more. "That's a shame."

"It really is," he responds with a smile. "Then at least I would have gotten something good out of this gig."

...right. Because this is his *life*, not some science experiment she can shelve when she gets bored of it. Not that she thinks she'll get bored of him, but— "Surely... there's... something that's good?" she says haltingly.

He glances at her out of the corner of his eye before offering a soft smile. "Well, I met you," he murmurs.

The blush that hits her cheeks is instant and almost overwhelming. Should she say thank you? She can't think past giving him a smile and slipping her hand into his, but the look he gives her in return makes her think that maybe she doesn't need to say anything after all.

Even with previous boyfriends, she'd never been a big handholder. Their palms were sweaty, they would grip too tight, they would try to hold in a way that made her hand feel weird—it just never worked.

Holding Ben's hand is not like that.

She thinks she could maybe hold his hand for a while. Forever, even.

Forever lasts about as long as it takes for the group to decide it's time for lunch.

But after lunch, she wants to claim his hand again. She's intercepted by Rose, who sidles up to her as they throw away the trash from the bag lunches.

"So, you and Ben, huh?"

"What do you mean?"

Now it's Rose's turn to look confused. "You guys aren't together?"

Rey laughs, maybe a little forcefully, hoping her cheeks aren't crimson. "No, we're not together."

"I thought—well, the way he looks at you could've fooled me." Rose's smile is more like a smirk.

As Rose skips off to join hands with Finn, Rey sneaks a glance at Ben. He's talking and smiling—smiling!—with Poe, before he looks back and turns that shy smile on her. And she thinks maybe she wouldn't mind if they *were* together.

Sure, there are some things he needs to work out—his family situation, for one—and she can't really do much there. But he's handsome, and smart, and kind, and she believes they met for a reason.

She's willing to explore what that reason might be.

After visiting the other exhibits, including the different aviaries and, naturally, the big cats, their trip draws to a close. Rey, her hand firmly resecured in Ben's grasp, suggests they go for dinner at a pizza place nearby.

Which the others enthusiastically agree to and she hears a quiet "No" whispered from Ben.

"Why not?"

His jaw works but he doesn't respond at first. When he does, it's a similarly quiet, "I don't have enough."

She wants to roll her eyes but she doesn't. For him. "You know I'll cover you."

He mutters something she can't make out but she does hear the words "first date."

Well, there's that blush again. On both of them, actually, as she catches the color dusting his cheeks and the tip of a pink ear peeking out from his dark hair.

"You can pay next time, how about that," she murmurs, and his blush deepens before he nods.

All through dinner, she notices him glancing her way and ducking his head as soon as he sees she's caught him. It's endearing, but she also wishes they could have an honest conversation that wasn't overshadowed by the fact that he's homeless, displaced, and a literal *werewolf*.

It does put a damper on the relationship.

They make it back to her apartment a quarter to 8, goodbyes are said, promises of a future hangout are made. Finally, it's just her and Ben left in the living room. He's shifting on his feet like he has something to say, but she isn't sure if he'll ever be out with it, so she breaks the silence.

"I'm really glad you came with us today."

He nods. "Thank you for inviting me. I know it was just another outing with your friends, but it—" He swallows. "It meant a lot to me."

She steps closer and places a hand on his arm. "It meant a lot to me, too."

His eyes flick down to her hand before returning to her face. "Thank you for treating me like I'm human," he whispers.

Her brow furrows, confusion setting in. "What else would I treat you as?"

His whole expression falls as his gaze hits the floor. "A monster."

"You are *not* a monster," she spits, filled suddenly with unexpected anger.

He seems surprised by her vehemence, but his mouth still twists in a self-deprecating smirk. "Evidence would suggest otherwise."

"What, because you turn into a well-behaved wolf once a month? Through no fault of your own? Is that what makes you a monster?"

"Werewolves are monsters," he says in a small voice. She's not sure if he's breathing.

Is this what he's been told all his life? She hopes that isn't one of the reasons he's reluctant to contact his mother.

After a deep breath to let go of the anger, she squeezes his arm and tries for a smile she knows falls short of her eyes. "Not to me." Ignoring his sharp intake of breath and the way his eyes widen further, she indicates her couch with a jut of her thumb. "Did you want to stay here tonight?"

He watches her a long moment before shaking his head. "I found a place, actually." He smiles weakly. "It's temporary, but they help people get back on their feet."

A grin splits her cheeks. "That's wonderful! I'm so glad!"

He nods and swallows and shifts. "They're letting me stay for now without an ID. I should get back, actually. But thank you." He sucks in a breath before blurting, "Can I hug you?"

"Sure," she says slowly, then feels as though all the air is sucked out of her lungs as he carefully wraps his arms around her. It isn't him—he isn't squeezing—but she can't draw a full breath.

Maybe it's nerves. Yeah, she'll blame nerves.

"Thank you," he murmurs again against her shoulder, before releasing her and gracing her with his shy smile. "I'll be seeing you."

He waves this time as he walks out her door.

## Chapter 6

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The music is loud, the TVs playing the latest game are distracting, and this guy won't *leave her alone*. Seriously, how many different ways can she say *no* before this guy takes a hint?

She's out for Friday night drinks with her coworkers, and half of them have left and the other half seem to be on the dance floor. She's had a couple fruity pink cocktails and the karaoke machine is looking pretty inviting, even more so now that this guy—Mike? Ethan? Chad? she can't remember—has apparently decided that she's the one he wants to bring home for the night.

He's just added her most recent cocktail to his tab—without asking—and is now loudly describing the list of celebrities he claims to know, while leaning *too far* into her space. She's about to give decorum the finger and send the beautiful cocktail to a liquid grave on his face when a voice comes from behind her.

"Doing alright here, sweetheart?"

*Ben.* She's never been more happy to see him. She doesn't even pause to consider why he's here, or how he found her. She just seizes the golden opportunity that's been dropped in her lap.

With a grin she spins and grabs his arm. "There you are! I've been waiting for you!"

To his credit, he doesn't seem the least surprised at her response. "I'm sorry I took so long. Traffic was a nightmare." Then he surprises her by leaning in and giving a gentle kiss to her cheek. By her ear, he whispers, "I hope this is okay?"

She's already nodding as he leans back again, and *there's* the smile she loves.

Mike-Ethan-Chad is glancing between the two of them, brows furrowed, his mouth still partially open with another name drop. "I'm sorry, this is?"

"This is my boyfriend, Ben," she says sweetly. Ben extends a hand and she can tell by the grimace on the other man's face that Ben's handshake was tighter than necessary.

"Riiiiight," Mike-Ethan-Chad says, drawing out the vowel. He looks back at her, opens his mouth as though he plans to say something, and stops. Ben is glowering at him impressively. "Nice to meet you," he finally mutters, before beating a hasty exit.

When he's lost to the crowd, she turns to Ben. "*Thank you.* He was driving me crazy!"

His expression melts into something softer and a shy smile emerges. "Happy to help."

"So what are you doing here, at a bar on a Friday night?"

He lifts one shoulder in a shrug. "I happened to be in the area and I saw you. Thought I'd drop in." His gaze drifts over her shoulder to scan the crowd. "Especially when that guy wouldn't leave you alone."

She can't contradict him.

And she also can't quite explain the rush of relief she felt when he showed up.

Her mind replays what he said and snags on the undercurrent of steel in his tone when he talked about the other man. Wait, was he... *jealous*?

He was totally jealous.

She fights back a grin and instead asks him about what he's been up to, and he tells her about the odd jobs he's been taking for something to do and some cash. She knows it can't be legal, but she understands how important it is for him to have this.

They spend a few hours there, and it feels like a real date, especially when Ben buys her a drink with a smile.

He gives her another little hug at the end of the night before they part ways, and Rey can't keep the grin off her face the whole way home.

Two weeks later at game night, Poe suggests she invite Ben over to join them.

"I think he's busy, actually," she responds, hoping they won't ask what he's busy doing. "He's busy a lot. But I can pass along the invite the next time I see him."

And who knows when that will be.

Since she has no way to contact him.

Which is fine, really. It's all fine.

But for some reason, she thought after the last time he left, she would see him more, not less. Especially when the full moon was last night, and she spent the entire evening wondering if he would show up.

She hopes it won't be another two months.

They don't play Monopoly at the game night. She's quietly grateful.

Even though the topic of Ben doesn't come up again, she sees Rose's concerned looks. But this isn't something her friend can help with, so she pointedly ignores them.

Another week passes. She gets an offer from a mechanic shop she'd applied to, one with better pay and better hours, and accepts it immediately. She'll be glad to see the back of Unkar Plutt and his junk heap.

She throws herself into her work at her new job, and somehow the constant busy is sufficient distraction for her not to think about Ben. At least, not as often.

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With one hand gripping the full trash bag, she pulls the door shut behind her with the other hand—

—and nearly jumps out of her skin at turning to find Ben standing there in the hall of her apartment, just outside her doorway. She rests the bag on the ground as she places a palm over her racing heart. "You scared the tar out of me!"

He's watching her with wide eyes. "Are you leaving?"

"No, I'm just taking out the trash," and she indicates the bag.

He nods and follows her down the hallway to the exit. Apparently, he's coming with on the trash excursion. It's a Sunday afternoon and she was taking the time to do some cleaning.

"Where have you been? I thought you were going to come back for the full moon."

"I didn't think you'd want to babysit me."

She frowns. "I was worried about you." It's been six weeks since she saw him last, and she's not ashamed to admit her concern.

"Really?"

She rolls her eyes at his expression: one part hopeful, one part teasing. "Yes, really."

"I'm sorry I made you worry."

"Well, thank you." Small consolations, this man.

They've made it back to her apartment and she lets him in without a thought.

"Are your parents still in New Mexico?" he asks abruptly, apropos of nothing. He's sitting on her couch, staring at his hands, and thankfully misses the way her jaw automatically tightens at the thought of her family.

"I don't know. I don't know where they are." She runs a hand over her face and in her peripheral, she can see he's watching her now. Well, let him watch.

His gaze finally lowers again after a long moment. "Oh." A sigh. "If you could talk to them—"

"I would in a heartbeat," she interrupts, and notices for the first time how fidgety he is. She makes an educated guess. "Is this about your mom?"

He nods.

"I'm sure she's worried about you. You've been gone what, almost a year? Over a year?"

"Over, yeah, I think," he mumbles.

"She loves you, Ben. I'm sure she would want to hear from you."

She watches him swallow once, twice. He clears his throat. Runs a hand through his hair. His jaw works like he's trying to get the words out.

She waits.

"It's why I'm here," he mutters at last. "I didn't want to come back until I was ready to talk to her."

It doesn't, in her opinion, exactly explain why he's *here*, but she's hoping he'll elaborate. "So..." she prompts when he doesn't continue.

"Isopingscouluseyorfon."

The words come out in a rush. She blinks as her brain tries to make sense of the jumble. “Sorry, what?”

He finally looks at her. She thinks she can see a hint of terror behind his eyes. What is he afraid of? “I was hoping I could use your phone,” he repeats, slower but not much louder. “To call my mom,” he finishes, when she must still look baffled.

“Oh! Yes, of course.” She pulls it from her pocket and hands it to him, and he holds it like a bomb ready to explode.

“I don’t know if I can do this.”

She places a hand on his shoulder. “Your mother loves you. She wants to hear from you. She’s *waiting* to hear from you.” She can only hope her words are true. While she can’t imagine they wouldn’t be, she doesn’t actually know the woman.

But she can tell Ben is encouraged by what she’s saying. His expression relaxes and she sees the barest hint of a smile. “Okay,” he says on an exhale, and dials a number from memory.

The apartment is quiet enough that she can hear the distant ringing. Once, twice, three times, four...

The longer the call rings, the more tension reaccumulates in his shoulders. After several more rings, it clicks and goes to voicemail. “The number you dialed: three-one-seven-six-eight...”

He glances up at her. “She didn’t pick up.”

“Leave a message!”

He swallows and nods. “Hey, Mom. It’s me. It’s Ben. I’m calling on a friend’s phone. I don’t have mine. Look,” he sighs, ‘I’m really sorry. And I understand if you don’t want to talk to me but I—I miss you.’ He closes his eyes and hangs his head. “I guess that’s it,” he whispers, and presses the button to end the call.

“You did it. You made the first step.”

He nods again and doesn’t look at her.

“Did you want to do something while we wait for her to call back?”

“Maybe a movie?”

They’ve barely begun scrolling through Netflix when the phone buzzes in his hand. He stares at it, wide-eyed, for so long she begins to worry he won’t answer. But finally, he accepts the call and lifts the phone to his ear. “Mom?”

She wonders if she should leave and give them some privacy, but when she stands his eyes meet hers and he shakes his head, expression pleading.

“Yeah, it’s Ben,” he’s saying. ‘Yeah. I—I’m in New York.’ He chuckles wetly at something she says. “Yeah.” A pause. A quiet, “I’ve missed you too.” Another pause. “I know,” he whispers. “And I’m so sorry. But I didn’t—” He stops. “I didn’t know if you’d want me to, after everything. And I couldn’t, anyway. I didn’t have anything with because I

left as a wolf.” He glances over at her. “I found someone willing to help, actually. Her name is Rey.” He smiles. “She’s the reason I called.”

He’s giving her a lot of credit. She makes a face and his smile grows, before it drops at something his mother is saying.

“Maybe. I’ll ask.” He pulls the phone away from his ear and covers the mouthpiece. “My mom wants to send me my ID and plane tickets to come home. Could I have her send them to you?”

Plane tickets? He’d be leaving New York? *Of course he’s leaving, idiot. He has to go back to his family. What right do I have to ask him to stay?* Somehow, she smiles and nods and says it’s fine, but her thoughts are twisting inside her mind. Didn’t she tell herself not to get attached? This is why. This is exactly why.

She stands quickly and heads to her bedroom, shutting the door behind her and sinking to the floor with her back against it. Tears gather and fall in spite of her resolution not to cry and she roughly wipes them away. It’s good that Ben is going home, she tells herself. She should be happy for him. This is what she wanted.

Maybe if she repeats it enough, she’ll believe it.

The tapping on her door announces the end of the phone call. “Rey?”

“Just a minute.” She’s proud that her voice doesn’t crack and betray her. With one last swipe over her face and a brief check in the mirror to make sure there’s no evidence, she opens the door with a smile. “How did it go with your mom?”

He looks lighter than he has in a while. “Really good. She wants me home and told me she misses me, just like you said.”

She can’t find it in her to begrudge him this. He needs it. Definitely more than he needs her. “That’s wonderful, Ben,” she responds, and pushes away the pang of hurt from the thought of family and the thought of losing him. “When do you think the stuff will arrive in the mail?”

He rubs a hand over the back of his neck. “Maybe a week? She has to buy the tickets, but she said she’d put them in the mail right away.” His small smile grows.

“Should I contact you at the shelter you were at when they arrive?”

“Oh. I’m not there anymore, actually.” His eyes drop to the floor and he shifts. “I left at the full moon, and they have a long waiting list.”

Even more reason he should have come by, but she doesn’t push it. He isn’t hers to take care of, really. She needs to remember that now more than ever. “Well, if you ever need dinner...” she offers, and he nods.

“Thanks. I’ll drop by here in a week.”

“Perfect! Now, how about that movie?”

His face brightens, and he nods again.



They settle on a comedy/action movie, she makes popcorn and opens a bottle of wine, and she allows the celebration to wash away the darker thoughts and feelings.

Everything will be fine.

## Chapter 7

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The package from Leia Organa arrives four days later. It's a padded envelope, stamped for first class mail, labeled "Do Not Bend." It looks impressive. At least, she's impressed.

Impressed, and hit with a sudden, petty desire to hide it and pretend it didn't come.

But no, she can't do that to Ben. She doesn't want him to leave, but she can't keep him from his family.

She calls Finn less than twenty minutes after she gets home and finds the package. "I know it's Thursday, but are you up for drinks tonight?"

"Can't, Rey, I'm sorry. Rose and I are going to see her sister this weekend and we have to pack."

No problem. Poe is usually up for drinks!

"Ah, any other night! I promised my abuela I'd help her move her couches, and that always takes *forever*."

As excuses go, it's not the best she's heard, but whatever. Maybe Jannah, from her new job?

"I have a date tonight. I'm sorry! I can call you if it doesn't go well!" Jannah's laugh echoes down the line, and Rey tries to match it.

"Sure, that'd be fine!" And if her tone is chipper but she can't bring herself to smile, well, there's no one here to see.

Jess is dog-sitting, Tallie is at her mom's, Kaydel is on vacation.

She's listlessly scrolling through her contacts, realizing she doesn't have anyone else, when her buzzer sounds.

Confused, she buzzes in whoever it is. At the quiet knock on her door, she looks through the peephole and sees... Ben? What is he doing here?

"Hey," she says as she opens the door. "I thought you were coming on Sunday."

His expression clouds. "Is this okay? I brought Chinese." And he holds up two bags of takeout.

How can she say no to that? "You make a good argument."

"Are you sure? If I'm interrupting anything—"

"You aren't. You really aren't." She opens the door wider and he grins.

"I was in the area and thought of you, and I found a dock loading job that pays pretty well, so I thought I'd treat you to dinner this time. You know, since you bought dinner on our first

date.” He actually *winks* at her and she barely stops herself from raising her eyebrows in surprise.

She’s not used to this flirty Ben, but she really enjoys seeing this side of him. He seems happy.

She thinks of the package sitting on her bed and knows she could make him happier, but she isn’t sure if she’s ready to deal with that right now. After dinner, maybe.

They make it all of ten minutes into dinner before he’s looking at her with a puzzled expression. “What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong with what?”

“Something’s bothering you.”

How does he know? She thought she was holding it together pretty well. “I’m fine.”

He snorts. “Don’t tell me that works with your friends.”

“It does, actually.” She squints at him. “Okay, there might be something on my mind, but how can you even tell?”

“You’re eating slowly tonight. You seem distracted, and your tone is lower than normal.” He lists off the supposed clues matter-of-factly, as though they should be obvious. As though it was natural for him to study her usual behavior.

Apparently, she is not holding it together very well. Surprising both him and herself, she bursts into tears.

Ben is around the table in an instant. “What is it? What’s the matter?”

In between hiccups, she registers the soothing circles he’s rubbing into her back. “Your mom’s package came today. Your tickets home are in my room.” She isn’t even sure if he can understand her with how much she’s crying. He doesn’t respond, and when she finally looks up at him, she finds he’s watching her pensively. “Are you upset I didn’t tell you?”

“No,” he says quietly. ‘I’m not upset.’ He pauses, before asking, just as quietly, “What happened, Rey?”

She knows he isn’t talking about the package. Somehow, he knows there’s something deeper. He *sees* her, in a way she never seems to find with her friends.

Maybe she doesn’t have to be strong, just this once.

“You’re leaving!” The words rush out of her. ‘I just got to know you and now you’re leaving.’ She draws a shuddering breath. “Everyone always leaves,” she whispers.

His response is to pull her into a full hug. “I’m sorry, Rey,” he murmurs. ‘I’m sorry I have to leave.’ He leans back to look her in the eye. “But I’ll come back, okay?”

She nods, not trusting her voice and because she doesn’t want to argue. That’s what they all say, *they’ll come back*. She’s still waiting for it to be true.

He smiles hesitantly and brushes a thumb over her cheek. “You aren’t losing me,” he says, and how she wishes she could believe him. “Besides, you have Finn and Rose and Poe.”

All of whom were unavailable when she needed them tonight, but she doesn't say that. He is the only one who's here, and he has to leave.

She sucks in another breath, her tears stopped for now, and musters a smile and nod in return.

If she's quiet the rest of dinner, he graciously doesn't comment on it.

Instead, he is the one to carry the conversation. He tells her about Indiana, his old job, and talks wistfully about his dad and what it was like growing up with a famous father and mother. He even rambles about his wolf: what the transformations are like, how his senses are heightened even as a human, how he manages to keep the wolf under control.

The traitorous part of her mind whispers that maybe he wants her to know him, but she tries to push the thoughts away. There be dragons, and all.

*Leaving, leaving, leaving...*

After dinner, she gives him the package and watches him open it. "When are the tickets for?"

"Next Wednesday." He swallows, and his eyes are bright when he looks up at her.

"Do you need a ride to the airport?"

He shakes his head. "The flight leaves at 2:15 in the afternoon. I'll take the subway. I don't want to keep you from your job."

She thinks she would gladly take a sick day if it meant seeing him one last time, but then thinks about her budget and the hit it would take from even one day off work. "Come by Tuesday night?" she asks instead. "I can call the trio and we can give you a going-away party."

He grins—she's going to miss that—and nods. "Sounds great."

When he leaves for the night, she's sure she'll dissolve into tears at any moment. But somehow, she doesn't feel empty. Something about what he said when he was comforting her—something rings true.

Next Tuesday rolls in with a bang, in a flurry of party preparations and work and trying very hard to stay busy so she doesn't think about what she's throwing a party *for*. The trio were happy to come when she invited them, and Rose is arriving soon to help with last-minute snacks.

The streamers are draped, the "We'll miss you, Ben!" banner is hung over the food table—and there's the buzzer.

In comes Rose, carefully balancing two trays of finger food and a cooler bag slung over her shoulder. "That's a walk!" she wheezes, barely managing not to tip one of the trays onto the floor as she drops it on the table. "When is your building going to get an elevator?"

"Probably after I move out." Rey chuckles. "That's always how it seems to go, right?"

"Unfortunately! I'm going to put these in your freezer. Finn is bringing drinks, and I told him to go easy on the alcohol."

“It’s a good thing it’s him and not Poe, then!”

They share a laugh, before Rey adjusts her stereo, making the music *just* loud enough to maybe dissuade future conversation—and the questions she knows her friends have.

Which works for all of about twenty minutes.

“How are you doing?” Rose asks, her voice over-loud to compensate for the music. “I know you sometimes have a hard time with people moving.”

“I’m okay.”

Rose’s eyebrows go up.

“I mean, this is what people do, right? They move on?”

Rose purses her lips. “Do you think he’s moving on, though? Moving, yes. But he won’t be completely gone, right?”

Yes. “I don’t know. Hopefully not.” And she tries to smile for her friend’s sake. “This is good for him, though. He’s going back to his family.”

“Which is why we’re having a celebration!” Rose grins. “And you know you always have us, right? Finn and I are here for you.”

“Thanks,” Rey mumbles as she blinks back sudden tears. Maybe this won’t be as bad as she thinks.

“Oh, hon, come here.” Rose wraps her in a tight hug. “Now don’t tell me you two weren’t a thing,” she teases as she pulls back after a long moment.

Rey’s only response is to grin and roll her eyes. If only Rose knew.

Finn arrives after another half hour, Poe shows up shortly after that, and finally Ben steps through the door, a tentative smile on his mouth.

“We’ll miss you!” they all cheer, and his smile widens.

They play board games and impromptu karaoke, and enjoy good food and good conversation. Before they even realize it, it’s approaching 11 o’clock at night.

Finn stands and stretches. “Alright, guys. It’s been fun, but it’s getting to be a little past my bedtime.” He grins. ‘Plus, I have to get up early for work tomorrow.’ He extends his hand to Ben to shake and Ben eagerly reciprocates. “Good luck, man,” he tells Ben, and Ben nods and mumbles his thanks.

Rose also says her goodbyes, giving Ben a quick hug and a smile. “Stay in touch,” she says, sending Rey a significant look and a cheeky wink.

Ben chuckles. “I’ll try.”

“Well, if you guys are leaving, I guess that means it’s time for me to go, too,” Poe says with only a slight grumble.

“You don’t have to go home,” Rey laughs, “but you can’t stay here!”

“Alright, alright.” He claps Ben on the shoulder. “It was really great to meet you, Ben. I wish you the best, okay?”

“You too. It was great to meet all of you,” Ben says with a glance around the room, and Rey can tell he’s fighting emotion by the way he swallows and runs a hand through his hair. “I hope I’ll see you again.”

“Don’t be a stranger!” Rose calls out amid the others’ murmurs and nods, before the three of them head out the door with a final goodbye.

“And then there were two,” Ben murmurs as the door closes and quiet descends.

Rey’s throat is suddenly tight. There would only be one after tomorrow. *No, I still have friends*, she chides herself. *I won’t be alone*.

It’s almost enough.

“Stay here tonight, on the couch,” she says quickly. Anything to delay the inevitable.

He watches her a long moment before shaking his head. “I can’t, Rey. If I stay I won’t leave.” He steps forward and takes her hand. “And I need to go home.”

“I know, I just thought—somewhere safe—”

“Thank you.” He pauses. ‘I know it hurts that I’m leaving.’ He reaches up and she’s confused about what he’s doing until he brushes a thumb over her cheek, and she realizes she’s crying. “I hope someday you’ll tell me why.”

“You’ll have to come back for me to tell you,” she manages with a watery smile.

“I will,” he whispers. Then, with no warning, he pulls her into a tight embrace. ‘Thank you, Rey,’ he says again, muffled into her shoulder. “You have no idea what you’ve done for me—no idea.” He clings to her until she hears snuffles, and then he moves back and rubs a hand over his nose.

He walks backwards to her door, like he doesn’t want to let her out of his sight, and waves as he reaches behind to open it. “Goodbye, Rey.”

“Goodbye, Ben.”

And then he’s gone.

She doesn’t truly cry until two days later, as the full moon shines through her bedroom window.

## Chapter 8

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Life goes on.

It only takes a month for her to stop seeing his face everywhere and fighting the urge to stop every tall, dark-haired man she sees.

Three months before she breaks down and admits to Rose that while she and Ben were never truly a couple, she wishes circumstances were better and that they could have been. That she misses him nearly every day.

She also finally tells them that Ben is the one Finn brought clothes for that first morning and laughs at the surprise on their faces.

After five months, she downloads a dating app—and deletes it after a week.

At six months, she hovers over the outgoing call to the number with the 317 area code with the intent to delete it. How many times has she wanted to call that number? She scoffs. What would she even say? “Hey, Senator Organa, I’m the random woman your son met in New York”?

Doesn’t have the right ring to it.

She can’t bring herself to delete the number, though.

After eight months, those dating apps are looking pretty good again.

She debates the pros and cons with herself walking home from the train after work one evening, not even noticing the car parked in front of her building or the slam of the door until someone is calling her name.

She blinks up at the man standing in front of her, confusion drawing a line between her brows. But then he smiles, and she *knows* that smile.

“Ben!”

“Hi, Rey.”

His hair is shorter, he’s clean-shaven, and he’s wearing clothes that actually fit—and they fit well. He starts to reach for her before shoving his hands into his pockets.

She pulls him into a hug anyway, wrapping her arms tight around his middle. “You’re here,” she breathes before she can stop it, a smile stretching across her face. “I didn’t think I’d see you again.”

He’d paused a moment before putting his arms around her, but now he draws back and it’s his turn to look bemused. “I told you I’d come back.”

“Yeah, well.” Plenty of people had. “Do you want to come up for dinner?”

“Actually,” he steps out of her embrace and rubs a hand over the back of his neck, “I’m here in New York with my mother. I was wondering if you’d like to meet her.”

*His mother?* This wasn't real. Surely, this was a dream. "Seriously?"

He chuckles, and she suddenly realizes why he looks so different, besides a haircut. He looks lighter, younger. Happy and healthy in a way she's never seen him before.

"Seriously." He turns and waves to the car she's just now noticing, and out steps the most elegant woman Rey has ever seen. "Mom, this is Rey."

His mother extends a hand and smiles warmly. "It's lovely to finally meet you, Rey. I've heard so much about you, I feel as though I know you already."

Rey gapes. He told his mom about her? Rey takes her hand, worries that her palms are sweaty or clammy, and stammers out what barely passes for a reply. "No, Mrs. Sol—uh—Organa, it's my honor, really. It's such an honor to meet you, I'm so honor—oh—"

And, she's rambling. She cuts herself off with a weak smile before she can say *honor* again—or anything else embarrassing.

Ben, for his part, is trying and failing to hide his amusement, but his mother's smile never falters. "Please, Leia is fine. I wanted to thank you for what you did for my son."

"I didn't do that much, really—" she starts, and is interrupted by Ben's scoff.

"*Didn't do much*," he mutters under his breath. "As though you weren't always there for me when I needed you, giving me the help I refused to ask for, and pushing me to reconnect with my mom. As though all that doesn't count."

"Well, I—"

"Rey, please." She's interrupted by Leia this time. "Let us thank you for what you've done for our family."

Leia reaches into her purse and then holds her hand out again, and Rey soon realizes Leia is pressing a square of paper into her palm. She finds it's a folded check, and she unfolds it to discover *too many zeroes*. The Organa-Solos are giving her a check for \$10,000.

She stares in shock for a long minute before she shakes her head. "I can't take this."

"Why not?" Ben's brows have drawn in concern—apparently he was also behind this decision.

Besides the fact that it's more money than she'll probably see in a year? She doesn't want to think about how well-off they are that they can just give this much to a near-stranger. She settles on the answer she hopes they'll accept. "Because it would make what we had transactional. And it wasn't. You don't owe me anything." She smiles. "Because you're my friend, and friends help each other."

"Alright," Ben says softly with a nod. "Can we at least buy you dinner?"

"Well, I won't say no to food. Just not Italian, because of the garlic."

"Are you allergic?"

"No, but isn't bad for—you know?"

Ben laughs. "That's vampires. Garlic won't hurt me."



“Do vampires exist, too?!”

“None that I’ve met, but stranger things have happened.” He steers her towards the car. Leia is watching them, clearly amused. Which is fine, for her, but the *last* thing Rey needs to deal with is a vampire on top of everything else.

At dinner—where Rey should have been more specific because this place is still way too fancy, there aren’t even prices on the menu—she and Ben catch up with what they’ve been doing the last several months.

As he finishes the story of how he’d called his former boss to apologize for disappearing, even though he knew he couldn’t get his job back, Leia clears her throat.

“Have you told Rey yet where you’re moving?”

“I was just about to,” he mumbles, before looking up with a small smile. “I got a new job and an apartment,” he says, louder.

“That’s wonderful!”

He nods. “We just finished moving today.”

But they were in New York City today? He’d told her earlier that they drove here. Which would mean his apartment is... “Is your apartment here—in New York?” She points down at the table.

His smile grows. “Brooklyn. Just a few blocks from yours. And I got a job at the bank on the corner.”

He came back. And he’s *staying*. For a moment, she’s so overwhelmed she can’t respond, until she realizes he’s staring at her expectantly and his smile is slipping.

“Is that okay? I mean, I know I didn’t tell you I’d move here or anything, but I thought—”

She silences him with a hand over his. “It’s fine. It’s more than fine, actually.” She laughs, suddenly giddy. “It’s really good.”

His smile blooms again, brighter this time so that it crinkles around his eyes, and he shifts their hands so he can rub a thumb over hers. It’s sweet, and she hopes for many more of these moments, now that she can actually dare to hope that someone will choose her, will stay for her—

“I’m so glad,” he murmurs. “All that time I was gone, the only thing I worried about was being able to make it back to you. I know I didn’t ask you to wait or anything, but if you aren’t seeing anyone, maybe—”

“Are we doing alright over here?”

She could strangle that waiter.

“Just fine,” comes Leia’s voice, but Ben’s eyes drop from hers.

No. She will not let this moment be ruined.

“Maybe what?” Rey pushes, quietly, holding his hand tight when he tries to pull it away.

“Maybe we could try again? And I could take you out for dinner?” He clears his throat. “On a date?”

She beams at him. “I would really love that, actually.”

His answering smile is beautiful.

Later that night, he walks her to her door, his jacket draped over her shoulders against the cold. Leia is waiting for him by the car.

“Thank you for dinner.”

“It was the least we could do.” He rubs her shoulders over the jacket and grins. “I’ll be by later for this, okay?”

She’s trying to think of anything that would stall him—she wants to claim a goodnight kiss from the man she’s been thinking about for months, so sue her—but before she can, he murmurs a quiet and awkward “Well, goodnight then,” and starts to head back to his mom.

Is that it? She tries to stuff the disappointment—they’ll have other chances in the future, after all. And maybe he just didn’t want to do anything in front of his mother.

That makes sense. It’s fine.

As he reaches the car, he suddenly turns and runs back to her. “Can I kiss you?” he asks in a rush, a little out of breath. “That is—I mean—if you—”

“Yes, Ben,” she says with a broad smile, and takes a step forward. *Please.*

He cups her face in his palm, before they both lean in—and bump noses. “Sorry,” he whispers, brushing a thumb over her cheek, and this time—this time—

His kiss is soft and unsure, slowly growing in confidence. It’s simple, but breathtaking. It’s what she’s always—

They break apart and she can’t stop the smile that spreads across her face—and neither, it seems, can he.

“Thank you,” he murmurs, low enough for only her ears.

“Thank you for coming back.”

“So that was just a kiss of gratitude?” His eyes sparkle with amusement.

“All that and more,” she grins in response. She’s ready to pick up where they left off—another day and probably not with his mom nearby.

But they have time.

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Two weeks later, Rey is sitting in Ben’s apartment, a superhero movie on the TV and a half-eaten bowl of popcorn on the coffee table. With his head in her lap and all four paws in the air, Ben blinks contentedly as she rubs his belly and behind his ears.

She never thought bringing home a stray puppy would change her life this much—and she's never been happier for it.